

OUR TRUSTWORTHY BIBLE

PART FOUR: TEXTUAL INTEGRITY.

No one has an original copy of any book of the Bible. How do we know that the Bible text we have is the same as that left by the writers? How can we determine if there have been changes from what was originally written?

In spite of many possibilities for error, the New Testament is the most trustworthy piece of writing that has survived from antiquity. This is because there are so many sources available for reconstructing the text. All of these can be checked and related to each other to determine the original text. Textual criticism is a very precise science and one that assures us of a pure text. The critic compares and studies all available evidence to recover the exact words of the writer's original composition.

PRIMARY SOURCES: MANUSCRIPTS

These are the first and most important source of information. This source primarily refers to the New Testament. A "manuscript" in this field refers to a hand-written Greek text from remote times. On what were they made? The New Testament mentions two materials: parchment (II Tim. 4:13), and paper (II John 12). Parchment was made from the skin of a sheep or goat. Paper was made from the pith of the papyrus plant. Under ordinary conditions, the parchment would last longer.

There was an obvious need for copies of the originals because the fragile materials soon wore out and replacements were needed. In addition, copies were needed to circulate (Col. 4:16). Copies were made by hand until 1450 when printing was used. Individual Christians might want copies for themselves, if they could afford the material.

The number of New Testament manuscripts available today is vast. This large number indicates the great many that were made and lost. The oldest known manuscript is a single fragment of papyrus found in Egypt in 1920. It was of five verses in John 18. It is thought to date within 30 to 40 years of the apostle. It is known as the Rylands Fragment. Our most complete manuscripts date from the fourth century when more permanent parchment and vellum were used as writing material. Our oldest vellum manuscripts are complete or almost complete copies of the New Testament. Other early manuscripts are the Chester Beatty Papyri containing portions of the Gospels, Acts, Epistles of Paul, and Revelation; and the Bodmer papyrus dated from the third century or earlier.

There are two types of manuscripts based on the style of writing used. The oldest are uncials from the first eight centuries. They were written with all capital letters, no separation of words, and no

punctuation. There are about 300 of these. The cursives were written in a running hand like our writing. There are about 2,500 of these dating from the 9th to the 15th century.

The three most important available uncial manuscripts date back to 300-450 A.D. The Vatican Manuscript has been in the Vatican at least since 1481. It is acknowledged widely as the most important. It was not until the close of the nineteenth century that the exact contents became available to scholars in the form of a photographic facsimile. The Vatican manuscript contains practically all of the Old and New Testaments. A few pages are missing, especially at the beginning and the ending of the Bible. In spite of its gaps, it is considered the most exact copy of the New Testament known. The printed text of the Greek New Testament relies largely on the Vatican Codex (Codex means "bound in book form").

The Sinaitic Manuscript is almost equal in importance. It was found in a monastery on Mt. Sinai in 1844. It was in a basket to be burned when discovered. It evidently contained the complete Old Testament, but some of it was lost before the discovery. The New Testament is intact and includes two non-canonical books. Extensive textual studies class it in type with the Vatican. It is now in the British Museum. The Alexandrian Manuscript is also in the British Museum.

SECONDARY SOURCES.

The Versions. As the gospel spread the Scriptures were translated into Latin and Syriac. (A translation of the Greek into a different language is called a "version". Thus in English we have the New King James Version.) The Latin and Syriac versions may have been produced as early as the later half of the second century, and are based on Greek manuscripts older than the ones we have. It is not possible to determine the precise word used in the original writing. Nevertheless the versions give a fairly exact knowledge of the general order and content of the underlying text.

Quotations. We have a great amount of written material from early Christians. Many of these lived near the end of the first century and shortly after. Their writings are filled with quotations from the New Testament taken from copies which are older than any we have. The way their quotations read tells us much about the Scriptures in their time. In many cases the writings contain mere allusions to the texts, and some are loose quotations. In spite of this, the number of quotations is so great that if all existing copies of the Bible were lost, we could reproduce nearly all of the New Testament just from

their quotations. The accord between these allusions and quotations and the manuscripts we have give valuable clues for establishing the date, place of origin, and types of the text.

Lectionaries. These are selected passages of Scripture designed to be read in the public assemblies. They were usually arranged in sections for this purpose. Most are of the Gospels, but some are of Acts and the Epistles. Being designed for public use, they were copied more carefully. More than 1,800 lectionaries are now available.

All these sources are carefully studied, and from them is created a Greek text from which English translations are made.

METHODS OF THE COPYISTS.

Respect for the word caused the copyists to work with exacting care. Jewish scribes numbered the verses, words, and letters of each book to be sure no additions or omissions were made. They would destroy a defective page. Men sometimes worked alone, but others worked together by having one read while several wrote. Despite care, errors would still slip in as we can understand. Many ancient manuscripts show evidence of correction which shows the care they used. As they did not believe in an infallible church, they worked harder to have a pure text.

Many are unintentional errors due to lack of attention to the work. A line could be skipped or may be copied twice. Words could be added by habitual patterns of thought as one might add "Christ" to the name of Jesus. Notes made in the margin sometimes got copied into the text. Some are intentional errors made in an effort to correct a supposed error, or to make a verse clearer by adding words. These additions might be copied over and over.

The large number of manuscripts make the number of variant readings much greater than would be the case if we only had ten copies of the New Testament. Someone might exclaim sensationally that there are 10,000 errors in the Bible. When the variants are considered, such a cry is seen to be based on prejudice. Most variant readings are of the sort found in Matthew 2. Some manuscripts say "the king Herod," others "Herod the king."

"The nature of the differences between the various manuscripts gives no cause for alarm. Most of the differences are in the form of words not affecting the essential meaning, in slight changes of word order, or in the use of one synonym for another". (Earle H. West, HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE, p. 8)

Our New Testament is a reconstructed or restored text. It has been reconstructed by modern scholarship from independent lines of witnesses. We can feel confident that the scholarship of the world has given us the Word of God in its purity.

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